Washington merry-go-round

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WITH LES WHITTEN

WASHINGTON — A bizarre scheme to combat drug smuggling by assassinating the international ringleaders was drafted but rejected at secret, inter-agency meetings during the Nixon years. Under the proposal, the Central Intelligence Agency would have arranged the assassinations in such smuggling centers as Burma, France, Lebanon and Turkey.

One participant in the planning sessions, none other than White House plumber G. Gordon Liddy, was so taken by the assassination idea that he recommended going ahead with it not only overseas but in the United States.

These are the recollections of sources with intimate knowledge of the secret meetings, which began in 1969. Attending were representatives of the State, Treasury and Justice Departments, the CIA and federal drug agencies.

This inter-agency working group rejected out of hand Liddy's plan to murder drug traffickers in the United States, our sources say.

One member of the group remembers, incidentally, that they were disconcerted by Liddy's habit of packing a gun at the meetings.

But contingency plans were prepared to assassinate international narcotics overlords in their faraway lairs. Under one plan that reached the drafting stage, the CIA was supposed to form an assassination squad complete with "sterile" helicopters and weapons that couldn't be traced.

This squad was going to swoop down on opium traffickers in Burma's northern mountains, slaughter them, destroy the opium and flee.

In the end, all the assassination plans were scrapped. But the discussions continued on other desperate measures. In April, 1971, for example, a secret meeting was held in Bangkok attended by foreign service officers, military brass and U.S. narcotics agents from Hong Kong, Honolulu, Manila, Phnom Penh, Rangoon, Saigon and Vientiane.

Under State Department auspices, they discussed plans to send criminals into the smuggling areas to destroy opium labs, to bribe foreign officials to enforce the drug laws more strictly and to flood the market with harmless heroin substitutes, according to the secret minutes.

The planning at the lower levels was superseded eventually by higher-level, interagency meetings. On Sept. 7, 1971, President Nixon set up the Cabinet Committee on International Narcotics Control.

Headed by Secretary of State William Rogers, it included the heads of the Defense, Justice and Treasury Departments, CIA and U.S. Mission to the United Nations.

As far as we can determine, all thought of the CIA's Mission impossible assassination teams had been dropped by the time the Rogers unit was formed.

NAZIS ENCOURAGED: Word has been smuggled to us that the Soviets have locked up Jewish prisoners in the same camps with Nazi collaborators who were arrested after World War II. The Soviet aim, apparently, is to break the spirit of Russian Jewish leaders. The Nazis, many of them guilty of atrocities, are being encouraged by Soviet prison authorities to provoke the Jewish prisoners.

Nazis are permitted to "supervise" the Jews, and many are openly engaging in "Jew-baiting," according to reports from inside the camp. One Nazi inmate named Shevchenko was heard to shout at a group of Jewish prisoners: "Let me plunge into the sea of Jew-blood again."

BUCKLEY AND BALZANO: We recently reported that Mike Balzano, the irrepressible Action director, was mismanaging the agency. Insiders tell us that President Ford would like to fire him.

But Balzano has been waving under the noses of his critics a letter of support from Sen. James Buckley, R.-N.Y., the respected conservative. The senator signed the letter at the request of his aide, David Kenne, who formerly worked for ex-Vice President Spiro Agnew.

The President doesn't want to alienate his already shaky conservative support, so he is holding off a decision on replacing Balzano. Congress may beat him to it by transferring Action's programs, such as the Peace Corps and Vista, to the jurisdiction of other federal agencies.

BEST BOOKS: Occasionally, we recommend worthwhile books that cross our desk.

Washington Post cartoonist Herb Block has summed it up, in black and white, Richard Nixon's 28-year public career. Block's prose is as incisive as his cartoons. He disavows the rumor, however, that he considered doing a cartoon showing Nixon and Eisenhower at the base of the Capitol steps shortly after Ike's heart attack, with Nixon saying: "Race you to the top of the stairs."

Richard J. Barnet and Ronald E. Muller, in their new book, "Global Reach," have provided a penetrating examination of multinational corporations. And Marcus Raskin proposes in his book, "Notes on the Old System," that Congress set up grand juries of ordinary citizens, not to indict but to take testimony and report on problems facing the nation.